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ABSTRACT

The decades following the 1960s saw an increase in the size of American schools and classrooms. However, recent research indicates that large schools do not work for minority and low-income students, tend to hurt attendance and student participation, and are not necessarily cost efficient. This digest summarizes the results of various studies that examined whether large schools have produced greater academic success at a lower cost; the ways in which small schools benefit students, parents, and teachers; and the need for establishing a collective school identity in conjunction with downsizing. Education experts recommend an enrollment of anywhere from 300 to 900 students and that schools-within-schools are a first step toward restructuring. (Contains 9 references). (LMI)

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ERIC DIGEST

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School Size

By Karen Irmsher

"There is a natural predeliction in American education toward enormity," said William Fowler (1992), "and it does not serve schools well."

During the last forty years, schools with thousands of students have become common. Among these are countless consolidations of small rural schools.

Many researchers trace the large-school trend back to a book written in 1967 by James Bryant Conant, then president of Harvard. In it, he concluded that larger schools (over 750 students) can offer more comprehensive instructional programs of greater quality at lower costs than smaller schools.

At that time, Craig Howley (1994) notes, middle-class students predominated in large urban schools. Since then, residential patterns have changed, overburdening large innercity schools with impoverished students and all the dysfunction they bring.

For decades few educators questioned these notions, but now the tide is turning. This Digest summarizes some recent research findings related to school size.

Have Larger Schools Produced Greater Academic Success at a Lower Cost?

In short, the answer is no, but with one qualification: Howley (1994) reports evidence that students in high socioeconomic status communities perform better in larger schools. Small size seems to benefit minority and low-income students more than middle- and upper-class students, say Valerie E. Lee and Julia B. Smith 1996. Many of the nation's largest high schools are in urban areas having high concentrations of disadvantaged students, who are ill served by large school size.

Michael Klonsky (1995), Mary Anne Raywid (1995), and others report that large school size hurts attendance and dampens enthusiasm for involvement in school activities. Large schools have lower grade averages and standardized-test scores coupled with higher dropout rates and more problems with violence, security, and drug abuse.

Lee and Smith (1996) found that savings projected by proponents of school consolidation have not materialized. Instead of long-assumed economies of scale, they discovered diseconomies, or penalties of scale. Large schools need more layers of support and administrative staff to handle the increased bureaucratic demands.

It is also important to consider how costs-per-student are calculated. Standard operating costs are usually computed by dividing the total amount spent by the number of students enrolled. But when cost-effectiveness judgments are based instead on the figure derived by dividing dollars spent by number of students graduating, the results are entirely different.

Fowler and others found that although large schools offer greater curricular variety, only a small percentage of students take advantage of advanced and alternative classes.

Large schools offer more specialized programs for disadvantaged and disabled youth, but students in these programs are more likely to feel cut off from the school culture. In fact, in large schools social stratification is the norm. Athletic and academic stars reap the benefits of daily close contact with adults. However, the other 70 to 80 percent of students belong to social groups that include no adults (Deborah Meier 1995).

Large schools function more like bureaucracies, small schools more like communities. Klonsky concludes that large schools generally "correlate with inefficiency, institutional bureaucracy, and personal loneliness."

In What Respects Are Small Schools More Beneficial?

A higher percentage of students, across all socioeconomic levels, are successful when they are part of smaller, more intimate learning communities. Females, nonwhites, and special-needs students, whether at risk, gifted, exceptional, or disadvantaged, are all better served by small schools. Security improves and violence decreases, as does student alcohol and drug abuse.

Small school size encourages teachers to innovate and students to participate, resulting in greater commitment for both groups. More positive attitudes and greater satisfaction are reflected in higher grades and test scores, improved attendance rates, and lowered dropout rates.

Deborah Meier (1996) cites seven reasons why schools of 300 to 400 students work best.

1. *Governance*. Communication is easier when the whole staff can meet around one common table.
2. *Respect*. Students and teachers get to know each other well.
3. *Simplicity*. Less bureacracy makes it easier to individualize.
4. *Safety*. Strangers are easily spotted and teachers can respond

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quickly to rudeness or frustration.

5. *Parent involvement.* Parents are more likely to form alliances with teachers who know their child and care about his or her progress.

6. *Accountability.* No one needs bureaucratic data to find out how a student, a teacher, or the school is doing. Everyone knows.

7. *Belonging.* Every student, not just the academic and athletic stars, is part of a community that contains adults.

"Relationships are cross-disciplinary, cross-generational, and cross everything else," notes Meier (1996). "Kids don't just know the adults they naturally like, or the ones who naturally like them. They may hate some grown-ups and love others, but they recognize everyone as members of the same human club."

Does Size Alone Make a Major Difference?

Downsizing cannot, by itself, guarantee that school transformation will unfold or that marvelous teacher and student performance will occur. Change is always difficult, especially when top-down mandates force teachers to make changes for which they are not adequately prepared. Or when teachers are asked to work double time, operating within their old system while creating a new one.

Meier, Raywid, and others agree that small schools have the best chance at success when they are permitted to become separate, autonomous, distinctive entities with a well-defined culture. Other factors influencing success included curricula developed around a theme or focus; tendency toward collaborative governance; voluntary participation of teachers and students; and collaboration with organizations and agencies outside the school.

"The benefits sought by downsizing efforts," states Raywid (1995), "appear contingent upon the ability of the subunits or subschools to establish a collective identity, projecting clear, identifiable boundaries and displaying perceptible differences—palpable to students—from whatever lies beyond those boundaries."

Is There an Optimal School Size?

Despite widespread agreement that the scale of most schools is too large, prescriptions for ideal size vary. Fowler, Howley, and others consider the potential for curricular adequacy to be reached at 400 students. Meier defines small schools as enrolling 300 to 400 students. Lee and Smith conclude that high school students learn best when enrollment is between 600 and 900.

A joint policy statement issued by the Carnegie Foundation and the National Associaton of Secondary School Principals recommended that high schools break into units of no more than 600 students.

None recommend fewer than 300 or more than 900 students. Howley (1996) suggests that "the most suitable size is likely to vary from place to place," with a community's relative poverty or affluence being a major factor. Small schools clearly provide an achievement advantage for impoverished students, while affluent students may fare better in larger schools.

How Can Districts Better Utilize Their Existing Large School Buildings?

Putting several small schools into an existing large school building can rejuvenate the school and enhance educational possibilities. Raywid and Meier both reported that doing so has typically resulted in great benefits for students, teachers, parents, and the entire school community. Chicago, New York City, Philadelphia, and many other cities have already instituted major restructuring efforts aimed at housing small schools in existing large buildings.

Many see schools-within-schools as a crucial first step in restructuring, states Raywid. But, she notes, when creating new schools it is important to resist grouping students by ability or achievement. Divisiveness and conflicts are also minimized if all the schools in the building are small schools, rather than one small school sharing space with a mainstream large school.

Schools that transitioned most successfully have been based on the principles of cohesion, autonomy, focus or theme, and a constituency assembled on the basis of shared interests. While the reasons for downsizing failures are still sketchy, reports usually cite one of three shortcomings: insufficient faithfulness to the small-school concept, insufficient autonomy and separateness, or failure to couple changes in the school culture with the structural changes.

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